

## **Voters could infuse Tahoe conservation with big \$\$**

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Voters could determine the future of Lake Tahoe next year, following the passage of a California state Senate bill that includes millions of dollars for conservation work in the Sierra Nevada. The Safe, Clean and Reliable Drinking Water Supply Act would inject \$75 million into the Sierra Nevada Conservancy for watershed health-related projects, and \$100 million into the California Tahoe Conservancy. “This is really good news for the Sierra Nevada,” said Steve Frisch, president of the Sierra Business Council. The bond measure will go to voters in November 2010, pending approval from Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, which could happen this week, capitol officials said. If approved, SNC could use the \$75 million for projects or grants to local conservation groups to acquire land with important watersheds, place easements, restore watersheds, provide education and outreach on watershed issues and conduct research, said Kerri Timmer, a project manager with SNC.

“We’re very excited to be included in the bill — the Sierra is a major watershed, providing 60 to 65 percent of the state’s water,” Timmer said. “The voters still have to vote, so it’s not a done deal, but it’s good to see it moving forward.” Patrick Wright, executive director of the California Tahoe Conservancy, said this goes a long way toward California’s share of Tahoe work, following funding commitments this year from Nevada and a potential commitment from the federal government.

Nevada approved \$100 million earlier this year for the Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program in the basin. The \$2.5 billion EIP is a joint program among federal, state, local and private stakeholders that aims to improve water quality, restore lake clarity, reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire and prevent the introduction of aquatic invasive species at the lake, in addition to other environmental restoration efforts.

A bill that could add \$415 million toward the EIP was introduced last week in the U.S. Senate by Sens. Harry Reid, D-Nev., Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., John Ensign, R-Nev., and Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., to continue the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act of 2000.

The California act is critical to the future of the EIP because the federal funding typically requires state and local matches, said Dennis Oliver, spokesman for the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

Although \$100 million would be designated for the Conservancy if voters approve the act, Tahoe agencies would need to compete with projects across the state for the remaining \$315 million of California’s share of EIP funding, Oliver said.

Water quality projects along state highways, projects to restore the Upper Truckee River, street

sweepers capable of removing fine sediment from roadways, shoreline access, parks and bike trails are priorities for the EIP at the South Shore, Oliver said.

“Priorities on the north and west shores will be the bike trail network, particularly between Tahoe City and Kings Beach, stormwater and watershed work and lake-front land acquisition,” Wright said, regarding the \$100 million possibly headed to the CTC.

He said Tahoe would also likely be competitive for money slated in the bonds for Calfire forest fuels reduction work and California Department of Fish and Game invasive aquatic species work.

Overall, the massive bill would invest \$11.1 billion in general obligation bonds for state water.

But State Assemblyman Ted Gaines, R- Roseville, opposed the bill in a statement last week. “ While this plan addresses California’s longtime need for additional water storage and much-needed infrastructure, it does nothing to help our state by creating more unaccountable bureaucracies that don’t answer to those they serve,” Gaines said. Frisch, on the other hand, said he'd like to see even more state funding like this in the future. “In the long run, we need to get funded equally as the California State Coastal Conservancy,” Frisch said. Schwarzenegger described the bond as a wise investment to upgrade California's antiquated water system and meet the needs of a growing population.

Funding to boost water recycling and groundwater supplies was added at the request of the mayors of Los Angeles, San Diego, San Jose, Fresno and Santa Ana, according to a copy of an Oct. 23 letter sent to the governor and legislative leaders.

Jason Dickerson, director of state administration at the Legislature’s nonpartisan analyst’s office, said voter approval of the water bond would add to California’s massive debt, which could soon require 10 percent of state revenue to pay down.

Department of Water Resources director Lester Snow said the bond would stimulate the economy by encouraging local spending and jobs. Previous water bond dollars have led to an additional \$2 to \$3 in local construction spending, he said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.